

More Than Just Memories

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

by

Alivia Bryak

**Thesis Advisor**

Timothy Berg

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy Berg". The signature is stylized with a large "T" and "B".

**Ball State University**  
**Muncie, IN**

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## Abstract and Acknowledgements

### Abstract

Photography has been around since the 1800s and has evolved in many ways. However, the struggles faced by those who pursue the art have been a steady constant from the beginning. Fear and doubt are two aspects commonly cited by photographers as having everlasting influence over their work. This thesis aims to confront my own fears and doubts within the photographic realm. In facing my insecurities as a photojournalism student, I list and critically analyze my inner thought processes about photography as a whole and place myself into challenging photographic situations to overcome my fears. In addition, I research documented photographic interviews and journals to better understand the history of uncertainty that looms in the pictorial world.

### Acknowledgements

To Dr. Berg – My mentor, my support, my confidant and my advisor; thank you for hashing through my fears; for inspiring me on a daily basis; for taking the time to listen to my doubts. For understanding and believing in me. Thank you for being a constant source of wisdom and insight. For the many valuable lessons I've learned from you since fall of my freshman year. Thank you for helping me see that my photography is mine. For taking this journey with me. For helping me through the struggles. For seeing something in me and helping me see it, too. Thank you for your kindness and generosity; for your compassion and your patience. I dedicate this thesis to you and educators like you.

I would also like to thank Tom Price and Ken Heinen,, who taught me photography from the basic to the advanced, and without whom I would not be nearly as successful a photographer as I am at this juncture.

Finally, I wish to thank all those who helped me along the way with my thesis—my family, friends, photo subjects and the Honors College staff. My overwhelming support system is what guided me through this thesis, and without all of you, my work would have been much more difficult. Thank you.

## Author's Statement

I am a senior photojournalism major, and barring any unforeseen obstacles, will be graduating this May. I have taken every required course and have been trained adequately enough in the technical art of taking photographs. By the standards set forth by Ball State University, I am fully capable of not only graduating but also becoming a viable asset to the workforce. Embarking on this journey is the logical next step on the road that we call life. Yet fears and doubts creep into my soul, latching on and depleting any confidence that once existed within me.

My creative project is so much more than a mere thesis. It is a challenge. A challenge to myself to face those fears that leave me perpetually fragile; those fears that create a stagnancy within my photographic work. I wanted to explore the depths of my consciousness and pinpoint exactly what terrifies me when it comes to photography. By pinpointing my anxiety, I hoped to better understand myself. It is not every day one faces his/her deepest fears, but there's something to be said for those who do. I wanted to define my apprehensions, and then I wanted to face them head on. Therefore, the first part of my thesis revolves around both self-analysis and overcoming those mind-made obstacles I, myself, have placed before me.

Being a photographer, I was curious to find others who felt the same as I—who dealt with the same doubts and concerns. Seeking out these photographers became a major component of my thesis project. I wanted to establish a connection not only between these photographers and myself, but also wanted to define a correlation between self-

doubt and the growth that occurs when one sets aside those hesitations. I adamantly began my investigation into other photographers—I wanted to know that I was not as isolated as I felt. For these reasons, the second part of my creative project centers on research; exploring the processes of photographers who have come before me to see how they dealt with these very same issues.

The photos I chose for this thesis were selected for a reason. They were hand-picked from photoshoots as images that moved me—photos that spoke to some sentiment in both my head and heart. These photoshoots were set up specifically to confront my fears surrounding photography. While the photos will say something about the subjects within the frames, I believe they say far more about me as a photographer. The images show my curiosity as well as my emotions. For each photo I made a conscientious decision to shoot a certain way, with certain settings and with certain details. These decisions may seem miniscule to others, but in regards to my personal photography mean a great deal. They illustrate what is most important to me, not only as a photographer but also as a human being. What I seek through my photos and wish to show others becomes almost like a graphic diary, exploring my inner thoughts and feelings through photographing others. These photographs are my take on the world, with my past experiences guiding every action. I illustrate my life by capturing the life of others.



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I hereby authorize her to use my photographic session as a training tool in overcoming her fears of photography, and also to write about this experience in her Honors College thesis for Ball State University. I am agreeing to this voluntarily, and have been made aware of all the details surrounding the usage of my photograph.

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Date : May 3, 2011

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Print Name : Timothy Berg

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Print Name :

Signature :

Date :



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## **Foreword**

Fear is a simple four-letter word. The connotations surrounding the term, however, are not so easy. Fear is all-encompassing and potentially debilitating. It can reach into the depths of one's being and prevent one from achieving even the simplest of tasks. Fear brings with it uncertainty and uneasiness. It can make you question who you are and it can thwart who you will be. Fear is the large elephant in a room that you don't want to acknowledge; yet, you can't escape.

Through overcoming this fear, however, we can develop as people. By conquering those battles we've given ourselves and mastering the complete terror associated with our darkest trepidations, we become who we were always hoping to be. The fear that has paralyzed us so completely, therefore, can also be one of our biggest inspirations. It is with this idea that I entered my honors thesis, and it is through the conquering of my own fears that I am able to say I am a better person for completing it.

## **The Challenge**

My particular project is much more than a mere thesis. Rather, it delves into my inner-psyche, exposing my deepest fears and doubts as a photographer. A certain level of self-analysis was required, an analysis in which one must be utterly candid and open about his/her reservations. To be completely honest, this was one of the hardest parts of the entire thesis. To openly admit my fears in a public arena left a bitter taste in my mouth. Openly admitting such things was, in my mind, an acceptance of failure.

Nonetheless, I knew the only way to complete this thesis in a way that would be beneficial to me was to hunt for my fears—to pinpoint and confront them, one by one. My challenge to myself was clear and simple: seek out the photography that makes me the most vulnerable and exposed, and find a way to work through that. I was not sure of the outcome, but I was open to the challenge. As such, I compiled a list of seven different photographic situations that add to my discomfort:

1. Family
2. Teenagers
3. Impatient People
4. People I've Known for a Long Time
5. Other Photographers
6. Inadequate Light
7. People Who Are Older Than Me

After developing this list of various photographic scenarios that tend to make me uncomfortable, I tried to probe even deeper to discover exactly what I was so afraid of, and why it these situations made me uncomfortable. Upon completion of the photo shoots, I made sure to reflect on my experience, whether it was good or bad.

Each of these eight scenarios causes me great anxiety. While I have studied photojournalism and have been told by esteemed professors that my work is above

average, I still find myself seriously doubting my ability. My lack of self-confidence is a common thread among these scenarios, and potentially one of the most debilitating obstacles I face in my photographic journey. My self-doubts come from many avenues.

First and foremost, I honestly don't feel comfortable behind a camera in a "professional" setting. As soon as I book any shoot in which the client pays me for the photographs, I immediately start to feel incredibly uncomfortable. The idea that these people are paying me to get exceptional photographs becomes stifling. To me, accepting money to take pictures essentially guarantees the client that they will get exceptional photographs. Guaranteeing such a thing goes against the core of my being. I can't guarantee a good photograph any more than a casino can guarantee that you will win the jackpot. In both situations, you have to take your chances; sometimes it's a hit and you get even more than you were originally looking for, and sometimes it's a miss. Accepting money for a photograph, however, means that you constantly have to be having "hits." Not only that, but misses are most definitely not allowed. The stress involved in this process becomes so overwhelming that being comfortable and confident behind the camera becomes virtually impossible for me.

During photoshoots, I also become hyper-aware of time and space. In a world where time is seen as a commodity, photographers cannot expect clients willing to sit for portraits for as long as it takes to get the photo right. There is immediacy in today's society that does not lend itself kindly to artistic expression. As a photojournalist, I am constantly told that I need to get the photo right the first time. I consistently struggle with myself in this area.

I always feel extraordinarily rushed during a shoot. As such, the shoot becomes less about making the clientele comfortable and more about making sure I am getting the shots needed to satisfy the customer. The resulting images are normally nice, but they are not spectacular. They are not what they could have been, had I not felt so rushed. Time becomes my enemy—my unyielding foe. I cannot press the shutter quick enough, nor change the settings fast enough. It is as if I'm running an uphill marathon where I must finish first. Such nervous tension becomes extremely exhausting.

Being trained in photojournalism has prepared me for many things in my career. Primarily, I have sufficient knowledge in the basic settings of my camera as well as a thorough understanding of effective photographic composition during real-time events. However, photojournalism classes did not prepare me nearly as well in portraiture. More specifically, I am not well versed in successful posing of clients during a portrait shoot. Photojournalism trains students to be merely observers; we are not allowed to alter a scene in any way. Doing so is considered unethical and a foul business practice for journalists. This mindset of capturing an unaltered reality makes posing people for portraits nearly an impossible task. I am trained to sit and wait for a photo opportunity. In portraiture, this is not acceptable. I am expected to know just the right pose and just the right look to create breathtaking photos. Clients will often ask me how I'd like them situated. At that point during a shoot, I become flustered. In my mind, all I want to tell a client is to "just be you" and I will then capture them on camera. In the real world, this is not possible. Clients are looking to me for guidance and reassurance. Needless to say, it is not very comforting to stay silent, point my camera towards the subject, and wait—which



is how a photojournalism student is trained. I liken my way of taking portraits to a lion waiting for its prey; I linger quietly, watching every movement patiently until I see the most opportune time to take the photo and CLICK. I capture the image. When I have to pose subjects—which I inevitably have to do for most shoots—they seem unnatural and never turn out quite how I envision. Even worse, the clients can usually sense I do not know how to pose them, and feel awkward when I suggest one that is out of the ordinary. I can tell, even in the beginning of my photographic career, that this is one aspect of portraiture that I will constantly be battling.

Perhaps there is nothing more disconcerting to me as a photographer than the thought of inadequate light. Photography is Greek for “light writing.” Suffice it to say, if one doesn’t have an adequate amount of light, photos do not turn out very well. In all honesty, the first item that my mind fixates on while contemplating a potentially new photo shoot is the amount of light available. Give me a cloudy day and some fill flash from my camera, and I am ready to go. A studio is even better, as I can control all the lights in that situation. I can even accept the challenge of taking photos inside a well-lit building, working around the ever-present yellows that creep into images when dealing with fluorescent lighting. However, throw me into a situation where there is little or no light – or even worse, a bright sunny day with no option of shade – and my heart starts to race uncontrollably. My palms get sweaty and I try to think up a billion different reasons why I cannot photograph that specific client. While I own a Nikon SB900 flash unit, it is not enough to make me feel confident in poor lighting situations. My lack of confidence is purely my own fault. I so fear inadequate light that even attempting to practice and make

myself better leads to disappointment and a sense of failure when things do not turn out just right. I avoid inadequate light like the plague—worried that even being in the presence of it will create a slippery slope of poorly crafted photographs that I will not be able to crawl out of. Admitting that I do not know what I'm doing is hard for me. Even more difficult is knowing that my lack of lighting ability is tampering with my images, making them far less amazing than they could be.

Package all of these uncertainties together and one can view my greatest fear of all: never being seen as a “professional photographer.” I ask myself often how someone who is so afraid and so unsure about most things in her field could ever be considered professional. My insecurities have to be affecting my photography in a negative way. I do not see myself as a professional photographer, or even close to it. Sure, I can take nice images, but these are not always consistent. In my mind, I see a professional photographer as someone who consistently takes exceptional photographs, day in and day out. While intellectually I realize this is not always the cause, psychologically and emotionally I am not so certain. Seeing myself as a proficient photographer becomes even more tricky when I take images of people I have known for a fair amount of time. Since they have known me prior to my education in photojournalism, I constantly feel as if they don't take my work seriously. When people knew me before I studied photography, it became difficult for them to differentiate between the Alivia they used to see with a disposable camera to the Alivia who can work a DSLR camera on manual mode. Additionally, I myself have trouble acting like an expert in front of these people. That is exactly how I feel, actually – as if I am putting on an act and it is just a matter of time before someone

figures out who I really am – a fraud. Oftentimes I stumble across individuals who have a career but do photography “on the side,” and this worries me to no end. I do not ever want photography to be a hobby, playing second best to some job I had to take to make a living. As much as I do not want this, I have prepared myself for this possibility. I have a minor in digital publishing, which deals with the printing industry. Printing is one of the top ten job markets in the world, and I knew I would have a fall-back, should photography not work out. Honestly, my father had a major role in this decision, as he has been concerned from the outset that I will not be able to make a living with my photo work. My father is one my biggest supporters, so I knew it was bad when even he had his doubts about my ability.

Almost all of my fears involve discomfort associated with being judged by a subject. In life, people are constantly judging others, whether they say these opinions out loud or keep to themselves. I do not have an established business set up, so most of my clientele are gained by word of mouth. On the flip side of this, people can also spread negative things about my photography—a constant worry of mine. I dislike photographing people I have known for a while because they will judge me, but I equally hate photographing people I don't know for the same reason. If I don't do the right things or say the right things, they will judge me. If I look like I don't know what I'm doing or if I take too much time, they will judge me. If my photos are not impeccable, they will judge me. Fear of their criticism causes me to judge myself—and as they say, you are your own worst critic.

I went into these challenges facing all of my doubts and fears. I knew I had to face them if I ever had hope of overcoming my anxieties. There was no turning back. I had to jump in—head first—and confront my darkest demons.

## **The Results**

Confronting the photographic challenges I set before me was nervewracking, to say the least. I wasn't sure how I would fare, let alone if I could overcome my anxieties. I had to take each challenge step-by-step, moment-by-moment in order to face them.

Despite all of these worries and doubts, I found successes in all of these experiments, satisfying not only my clients, but, most importantly, myself.

I was able to spark relationships with most subjects, easing any tension and allowing for them to open up in front of my camera. Surprisingly, this wasn't as hard of a task as I originally had predicted. I realized that common ground can go a far distance. After short conversations with each of my subjects, I was able to better gauge their own personalities and interests. In using that information, I created a relaxed environment – one that is a necessity for good portraiture. One of the best examples of this was when I photographed my friend Allison – who fell under the category of 'People I've Known for a Long Time'. I have known Allison since the second grade and we have been good friends ever since. Originally, I thought this would be a hindrance in making good images. However, I soon came to notice that photographing her was not only easy but also fun and relaxed. During



the shoot, we were often chatting about our lives and laughing about inside jokes. The ease and fluidity of our friendship is evident in the photographs I took of her that day. Her expressions were calm and candid – and I believe she was completely comfortable during the shoot. These images were by far some of my favorites from the challenges. The photographs I took of my brother Josh, who falls under the ‘Family Members’ category, are also similar. Because Josh and I have a close relationship, it became effortless in easing his worries in front of the lens.

Another success I experienced came with my perceptions of time. Throughout all of my shoots, I made a valiant effort to concentrate not on measuring time, but rather on capturing the moments before me. While photographing my sister Abbi –under the ‘Impatient People’ category—this self-meditation became even more critical. From the beginning, Abbi wanted to get down to business. Upon explaining the kind of shot she was looking for, we began the process. Only once throughout the entire time did I sense her impatience. I had taken many photos and at some point, Abbi stated that she had only wanted a couple and that I didn’t need to take anymore. I then had to explain that I hadn’t quite found the photo I was looking for, and continued until I was content with my work. From this shoot I learned that it was okay to take time, if it meant that I was getting quality work. I also realized that clients are not quick to object to a longer sitting time if you explain that you are still looking for the shot. In general, I realized talking with potential clients about concerns or about my own technique is helpful; being open and creating this dialogue aids in effective portraiture, in my opinion.



Along with my success came my failures. Failure is an inevitable entity in life. From failures, however, we can grow as individuals; we can pinpoint our weakest links and actually do something about them. With this mindset, I decided not to be overly critical of myself, but rather reflect on the experience. The hardest challenge, by far, was photographing Ashley, a local Muncie teenager. I knew from the onset of the shoot that she was going to be difficult to photograph because she already had a preconceived notion that she did not look decent in pictures. Ashley was rather shy during the shoot, and while I tried to talk to her, she kept mostly to herself and seemed uncomfortable the entire time. At some point, I asked her specifically what she didn't like about being photographed. She explained that she was self-conscious because of her braces and she didn't like the awkward way she appears on camera. Once I knew where her discomfort derived from, I attempted to alleviate her concerns by explaining my technique as a photographer. I also made a point to explain that she had not ever been "professionally" photographed—so she shouldn't jump to conclusions on the outcome just yet. While I did end up with a photo that I particularly found moving, I believe that I was not able to help Ashley overcome her dislike of being photographed. Near the end, she was smiling more, yes. However, her smiles looked forced and insincere. While I did overcome my fear of photographing teenagers, I failed to make Ashley comfortable enough to open up.

Given this situation, I must work on easing the nerves of my subjects. Perhaps the reason this is difficult for me is because I myself have fears and doubts when it comes to photography. It's possible that my own insecurities are being picked up by those around

me, making for an uncomfortable atmosphere. Somehow I need to learn to control my own emotions and uncertainties, so that those around me can be comfortable.

The shoot I worried about most, specifically in regards to being judged, was with Dr. Berg. The only logical explanation revolves around the idea that he knows the ins and outs of me in regards to photography more than almost any other person as a result of being my adviser. He has held a discourse with me specifically about my own fears and insecurities; not only this, but he has heard about all the personal battles I've faced throughout life that have molded me into the person I am today. While some may see this as a positive, I felt the most vulnerable when I was photographing him. More than that, I felt a certain loss of control. I was completely out of my element as I faced four different challenges in one package, and I believe it showed. I felt flustered because I have very little experience with lighting outside of a studio. I felt unintelligent because my lack of knowledge constantly was being shown. Dr. Berg essentially had to hold my hand through the entire process, telling me how to create the look I wanted. While this was a great learning tool and something I treasure as a student, the professional part of me realized just how badly my photography needs work. While I might have had some insecurities before this shoot about being a photographer, I think the shoot might have only added to my feeling of inadequacy. Dr. Berg was nothing but nice and supportive and I definitely learned a lot. I even managed to snap several photos I'm quite fond of. However, I walked away from the shoot questioning myself and my skills more than ever.

After all the challenges were said and done, I came to one unforeseen conclusion: most of my fears regarding photography did not come to fruition during a shoot. I spent hours and hours before a challenge worrying myself sick over the upcoming shoot. My brain obsessed over the difficulties I would face, and I would become paralyzed with fear at the thought of these photographs. Now, my fears are significantly less than they were at the onset of this thesis. I will always have a hint of insecurity in the recesses of my mind, but knowing that I have overcome these challenges before aids in my self-confidence. It's empowering knowing that I can not only face my fears, but also rise above them to create images that I'm happy with; images that my clients are happy with. I had no idea that the challenge part of my thesis would lead to this conclusion. I was thoroughly convinced these challenges would play out like a fiddle to my fears, showing them at every corner. I was wrong, and for that, I am grateful.

I have no doubt that I still have much to learn as a portrait photographer; this became evident through the shoots that weren't as successful. I'm far from where I want to be professionally. The light at the end of the tunnel, however, is present and shining bright. Before these challenges, I would shy away from photography that made me uncomfortable because it was the easy way out. I wouldn't have to face my fears and I wouldn't be disappointed if I failed. It wasn't until I started this thesis that I realized that failure wasn't so much attempting photography and not getting good results; failure was cowering in the face of fear, becoming immobile and stagnant in my skills. I realized that a person is incapable of knowing everything there is to know about photography.

Inevitably, I will have to spend the rest of my life learning and growing as a

photographer. I'm at the beginning of my career—not the end. As long as I can keep this momentum and this mindset on going, I think I will be more than okay. I don't want to be comfortable in life; I want to challenge and push myself to the limits. I am absolutely terrified, but I have learned to embrace that fear and let it develop me. Much like a photograph, I'll need to get past the negatives to develop the positives.

## **Research**

Through several discussions with my thesis advisor, it became apparent that researching the fears and thought processes of other photographers would aid me in pinpointing and overcoming my own obstacles. Having not been well-versed in the thought-processes of fellow photographers, I must admit that I was a little skeptical on the information I could find and worried that the research would not be pertinent to my thesis. However, I was completely taken by surprise when I found—time and time again—photographers who have experienced everything that I am going through at this moment.

As such, research began taking over. I soaked up the words and thoughts of those who have gone before me like a sponge to water; I couldn't get enough.

My first bout of research surrounded Diane Arbus, where I looked primarily at her book entitled *Revelations*. Ironically, this title became synonymous with not only Arbus' book, but also my eye-opening experience. For so long, I had felt alone in my journey, struggling and fighting to push forward. I felt completely isolated from the rest of the



photographic world and couldn't shake the voice in my head constantly reminding me that no one else had it this hard—that something was surely wrong with only me. The Arbus research was the first to not only unmask the emotions I was feeling behind my work but also to validate them. Arbus put into words every fear and doubt that has crossed my mind throughout my journey as a photographer. For the first time, I did not feel alone. Rather, I felt invigorated.

Arbus likens photography to a storm. In *Revelations*, she writes:

“I am strangely alone although people are all around. They keep disappearing. No one tells me what to do...It is like an emergency in slow motion. I am in the eye of the storm.” (Arbus 17)

This was the first excerpt of many to come that would give me chills. Arbus' words resonated within me, giving substance to my fears. In a way, this allowed me to express my own concerns and doubts more freely and openly. I am never quite as vulnerable as I am when I'm making photographs. Photography affects me more than words can illustrate. It consumes me with self-doubt, loathing and a sense of dread I can't escape. The anxiety of photography can keep me up all night, and the calm will only set in once the photos are delivered to a client. An upcoming shoot can paralyze me so completely that I often can be found contemplating cancellation. Arbus, I believe, also had these self-doubts.



Perhaps one of the most comforting passages I read from *Revelations* was when Arbus reveals that she, too, has issues when it comes to selecting the correct settings on her camera. While Arbus is not necessarily known for technicality in photography, she has created beautiful images that have received praise from the general public. Yet, even with these accolades, Arbus constantly felt as if her images were not good enough, nor her skill with a camera honed enough. She believed that she had “a thousand misses,” until she finally shot something she deemed worthy. (Arbus 65)

For me, I was amazed that such an esteemed photographer was going through the same issues as myself. My discontent as a photographer comes primarily from knowing how I want an image to turn out in my head, and then fighting through my settings to get the desired look. This process becomes draining and emotionally exhausting, especially when working with clients. It is difficult to get another person to sit for a long enough time to get the photo to be exactly what I envisioned. As such, I am consistently unhappy with the work that I do. My images are good, but they are not good enough. My insecurities seep in, and self-criticism warps my thinking. No matter how many times someone tries to tell me my work is stunning or who this praise comes from—it is never enough. It is never what I want to hear. Arbus said something similar when she wrote:

“Everybody was lifting me up high and crowning me and congratulating me and I was smiling – and I really hated it and I hadn’t done one single good piece of work. It was the craziest pretense in the world.” (Arbus 125)

Upon researching Arbus, I was eager to find other photographers with whom I could make a connection. One such person whom I also find intriguing is Sally Mann. While I didn't feel as connected to her as I did with Arbus, I believe she made valid points about photography that lend itself to the fear most photographers experience.

Mann suggested that the biggest obstacle for creating a "good" photo is all the work that has come before it. In other words, the photographs that one took before—which seemingly came with little effort – make taking even better photos nearly impossible. She said that each image "ups the ante." To this, I would have to agree. Capturing an image that is beautiful and striking can be extraordinarily rewarding. The downside, however, comes when one realizes the next images won't or can't be as good; it creates a constant struggle and uphill battle to obtain an even better photograph. Photography becomes a race to the finish line, except there is no finish line—only running towards something unreachable. (Mann 2008)

It was at this point in my research that I made a startling self-discovery, which I accredit to Mann. My fears, my doubts and my insecurities are not merely related to photography, nor is that what caused me to doubt myself. My self-criticism started young.

Mann stated, "Part of my personality is that I was raised by a father who didn't allow disappointment. Whatever we did had to be done absolutely perfectly." (Mann 2008)

For me, my mother was one of the biggest components adding to my self-doubt as a child. I was consistently told that my grades were not good enough, my looks were not cute enough and that I needed to work harder if I wanted to be someone. This mindset – that I was never good enough – has been so instilled in me that it has carried into my photography. My work is never good enough; I am never satisfied. My mother said these things to push me harder, to help me get better things in life. How could she know that what she did would be so damaging, so emotionally taxing?

My mother has instilled such a sense of perfection within me that my entire life has been spent chasing that unattainable flawlessness. I did not even realize how deeply seeded my mother's words were until I heard Mann talk about her own experience with her father. All of sudden, something in my mind just clicked and I finally understood why I am the way I am. This understanding does not help fix the problem by any means. However, now that I know where my insecurities stem from, it makes coping with them a little bit easier.

From Mann, I stumbled across photographer Anders Petersen. Petersen was highly personal in his discussion on photography, which was reminiscent of my previous Arbus research. Again, I found myself moved by his words, connected by emotion. Petersen described being a photographer as a process of “peeling”—that is to say, one must peel away all the emotional and psychological baggage he is carrying around in order to achieve any decent photographic image. Petersen's discussion on this topic struck a nerve in me. This honors thesis, after all, is about doing just that; I am attempting to peel away

my fears and rise above them, in hopes that my photography will improve. I entered the thesis realizing that my photography was affected by my baggage. I knew at the beginning that something needed to change if I was going to continue this journey.

Petersen himself touched upon the subject of fear in his interview. He commented:

“I am scared as hell, yes. But I am not scared of being scared. I am a very afraid man. I have that in common with many, many photographers, I think.” (Casper 2011)

I suppose it shouldn't have surprised me to hear about other photographers being afraid, especially after my Arbus and Mann research. However, hearing Petersen say flat out that he was “scared as hell” was comforting, and almost therapeutic. Not only that, but Petersen commented on how many photographers feel the same way—something that I've been yearning to hear for most of my college education. Again, he makes a poignant point when he says that he is not scared of being scared. After some thought, I came to the deduction that I, too, needed to reach this point. I need to acknowledge my fears, acknowledge my doubts—but I need to embrace them. In the past, I normally would have run from these anxieties. I see now, however, that running from them only makes the doubts that much bigger, that much more powerful. To break the hold these complexities have on me I must struggle through them. The struggle might continue throughout my whole life, but it is a struggle I have to endure on my own if I am to make it as a photographer. The beauty is in knowing that while I am facing my own struggles on my own journey, there are others who have to face their own troubles just the same. The



comfort and reassurance that comes from knowing this is inexpressible; to not feel completely alone is a new feeling that I cherish.

The doubts I have are extremely hard to admit to others, mainly because to me this is an admission of failure. As such, during my research I also wanted to find photographers who talked about failure. Ralph Gibson was one such photographer. In an interview, he explains that a photographer must learn from his failures. Gibson believes that he learns more from his failures than he ever does from successes. He said,

“Prior to realizing that I might have misinterpreted [failure] as frustration.” (Beach 2009)

At this juncture, I realized how accurate his thought-process actually was. Whenever a photo doesn't turn out the way I imagine or hope, I automatically become frustrated—so much so that I will oftentimes just give up. Normally this forfeit comes with the cost of feeling like a failure, and as such I usually never try my hand at that particular type of photography again. In hindsight, this is an absolutely horrible trait. Walking away from photography that challenges me achieves nothing. I learn nothing. Gibson said that the only thing successful photography achieves is satisfying and pleasing people—but that he doesn't learn much from it. I had a similar experience when I photographed my sister—the images she chose as final prints pleased her, but they did not please me. Quite opposite, the images of her I enjoyed most were the ones my sister felt disdain for. I had never realized how true it was that photos that please others did not help me as a

professional until I came across this research . I can take a plethora of nice photographs and for a split second I will feel happy and good about myself. This moment of euphoria is so minute and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, yet all this time I was chasing that feeling—all I wanted was to experience that success all the time. The problem was that I didn't discover anything new when I took good photographs. I viewed the photos, experienced a small sense of success and then went on to the next shoot with little or no ways to improve myself. I now am asking myself this question: What's the point of taking photographs if you're not going to learn how to get better? The simple answer is, there isn't one.

I believe Gibson's point was straightforward; photos that don't turn out the way a photographer envisions can get frustrating. The thing we need to realize, however, is that every failed attempt is an opportunity to better oneself. In looking at the situation in this light, failures become hopeful instead of disparaging. They become an asset instead of a burden.

Photographer Elliot Erwitt added to Gibson's testimony, saying that taking pictures has absolutely nothing to do with seeing things as they are or being familiar with your subject. Rather, he believes photography is about being surprised and interested. Erwitt once said, "It's not about thinking, it's about discovery." (Beach 2009) Discovery cannot happen without taking chances or risking failure. Discovery involves going out of one's comfort zone to achieve a higher level of success. My brain focuses around achieving success, yet interestingly enough it is also the main hindrance to that triumph. My brain

overthinks every situation and paralyzes my actions through complete and utter fear. For a person who is constantly striving for success, my brain becomes the ultimate kryptonite. I didn't know this previously, but the main hindrances to my success as a photographer stems from lack of self-confidence. I didn't realize just how paralyzing my fears were to my work, crippling any chance of improvement. Now that I know this, I must find a way to reverse it.

Photo shoots make me uncomfortable in general, mainly because I feel inadequate and almost as if I'm "playing" photographer. F. Scott Schafer was another photographer who had similar feelings. He said,

"I'm on stage. I'm a performer. I don't know if it's the power of being the guy in charge, but it's almost like becoming someone else." (Dalton 2011)

In looking at myself introspectively, I am able to realize now that my personality does not suit that of a photographer. I am a very shy, introverted person until I get to know others. I'm modest and laid back, and for the most part non-confrontational. While I am oftentimes considered a leader in academics and group settings, it is still very difficult for me to be in charge. I don't like giving orders, nor do I enjoy having the entire responsibility lie with me. During a photoshoot, I have no choice in this matter. I must take charge if I want to get the photo I envision. People who ask me to take photographs are looking for direction and guidance; not receiving that makes me appear weak and unprofessional. As such, I agree with Schafer's view on photography—I have to become

position I am in. I have to perform a certain way for my clients so they will feel comfortable themselves. One of my insecurities is that one day someone will realize that I'm merely "playing" photographer, and lack any skill whatsoever. Sometimes I see my photography career as a ticking time bomb, just waiting to explode as soon as someone pushes the button and reveals who I really am. The wait for this becomes excruciating; the panic ever present. Yet still I perform, still I become a photographer for others. I refuse to give in. I refuse to stop trying.

The research included in this thesis is minute in comparison to the dozens upon dozens of excerpts and interviews photographers have given in relation to their disdain and fears on photography, yet it also encompasses the core struggle all artists face: we must struggle through our doubts and our insecurities. We must battle through the hard times, even if we don't see that light at the end of the tunnel. We are not alone in our conflicts. For every moment my heart races at the thought of inadequate lighting, there are ten other photographers going through the same issue. This will never change. Fear is not a new concept in the arts, no matter how new it appears to me. My journey is my own, yes; but I am not alone in my fears, nor will I stand alone in my struggles.

## **Conclusion**

I am absolutely terrified of photography. Every aspect of it makes my blood run a little faster and makes my heart beat a little harder. I constantly doubt my skills and my



abilities and compare myself to others. I feel inadequate among clients and every photo shoot becomes a struggle. I came into the thesis knowing these things. I come out of this thesis with the same issues.

However, there is one major change that has taken place throughout this semester; a change that will forever mold the photographer I will be from here on out. This thesis has shown me that I have strength to face my fears and my challenges; it taught me that fear only has power when left unobstructed. To become a better photographer, I need not better equipment or expensive studios; rather, I need the courage and conviction to face the unknown. I need the determination to strive for more, the will to overcome my uncertainties. All of these things were traits I originally thought I lacked. Through the completion of this thesis, I realized I not only possess these qualities but also have started the process of implementing them into my photography.

Even though I still fear many of the challenges I had to face throughout this project, my fears are not insurmountable anymore. They no longer hinder my life as a photographer. Rather, they give me hope. They inspire me to overcome their challenges. I've learned that overcoming the challenges doesn't necessarily mean I'll be met with success; I know now, however, that failures can be just as rewarding with the right mindset.

Most importantly, I recognized that I'm not alone. The research I conducted on photographers who have explained their own doubts and insecurities provided me with a sense of community—one that was not apparent before the thesis work. Through reading

their words and listening to their interviews, I was able to ascertain that questioning one's abilities is common in photography, even among people whose work is highly esteemed by the general public. Where I once felt isolated and as if I was carrying a burden meant only for me, I now feel liberated and at peace. There is a certain elation in knowing that I will never again feel unaccompanied in my anguish. It's a comforting feeling more than anything else—one that I didn't expect to gain.

My honors thesis was about as personal a project for me as it could get. I had to delve into not only my professional psyche, but also my personal one. I had to explore the darkest parts of my mind in order to shed light on my lack of self-confidence. Needless to say, embarking on this sort of project was daunting. It's hard to believe that it was only four months ago that I started this thesis; I feel like I've grown so much from the person I was then to now. I'm more confident, more self-assured. I'm no longer afraid of being afraid. I owe all of this growth to my thesis—and will never forget the lessons I've learned from this project.

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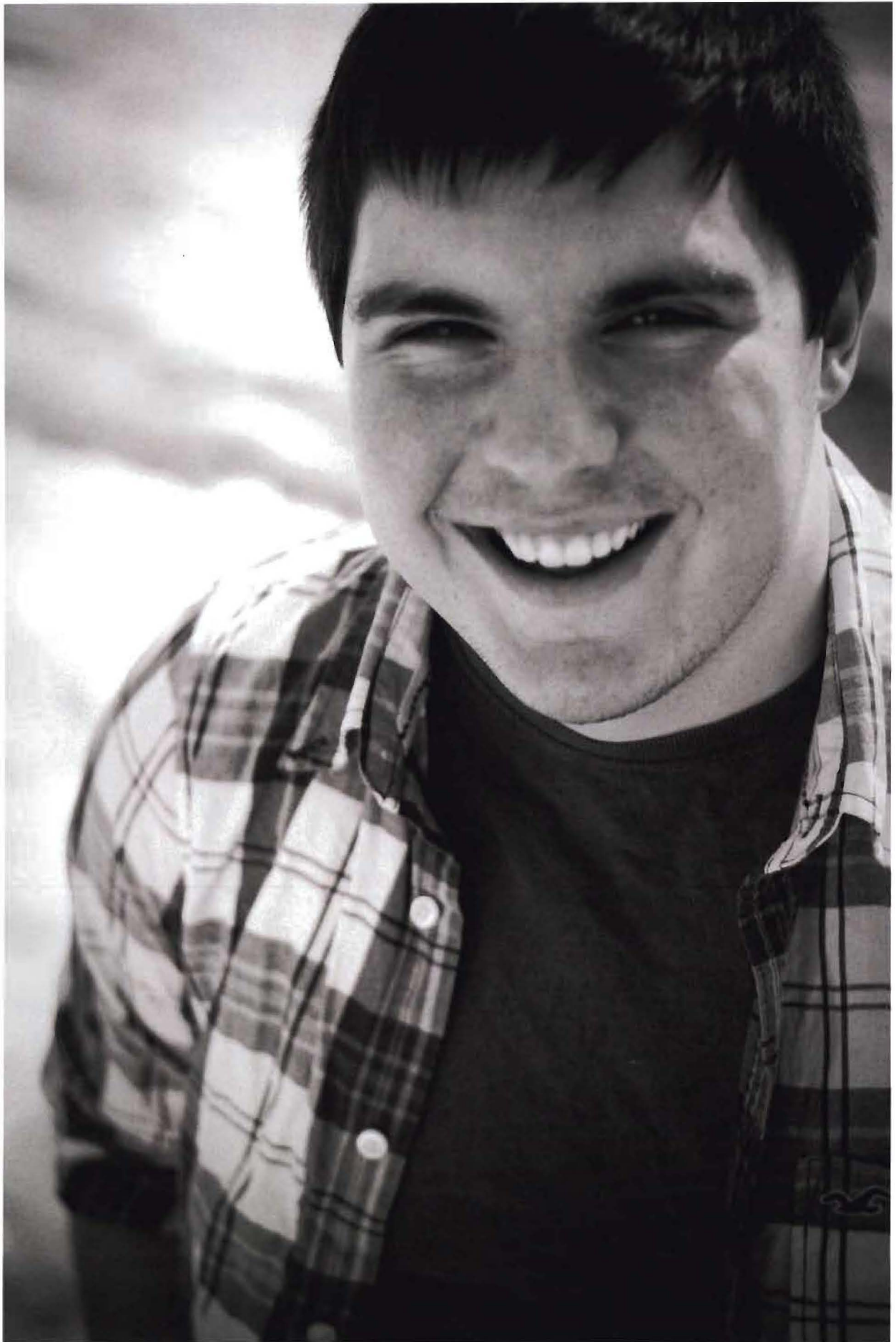
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## Challenge 1





## Challenge 2

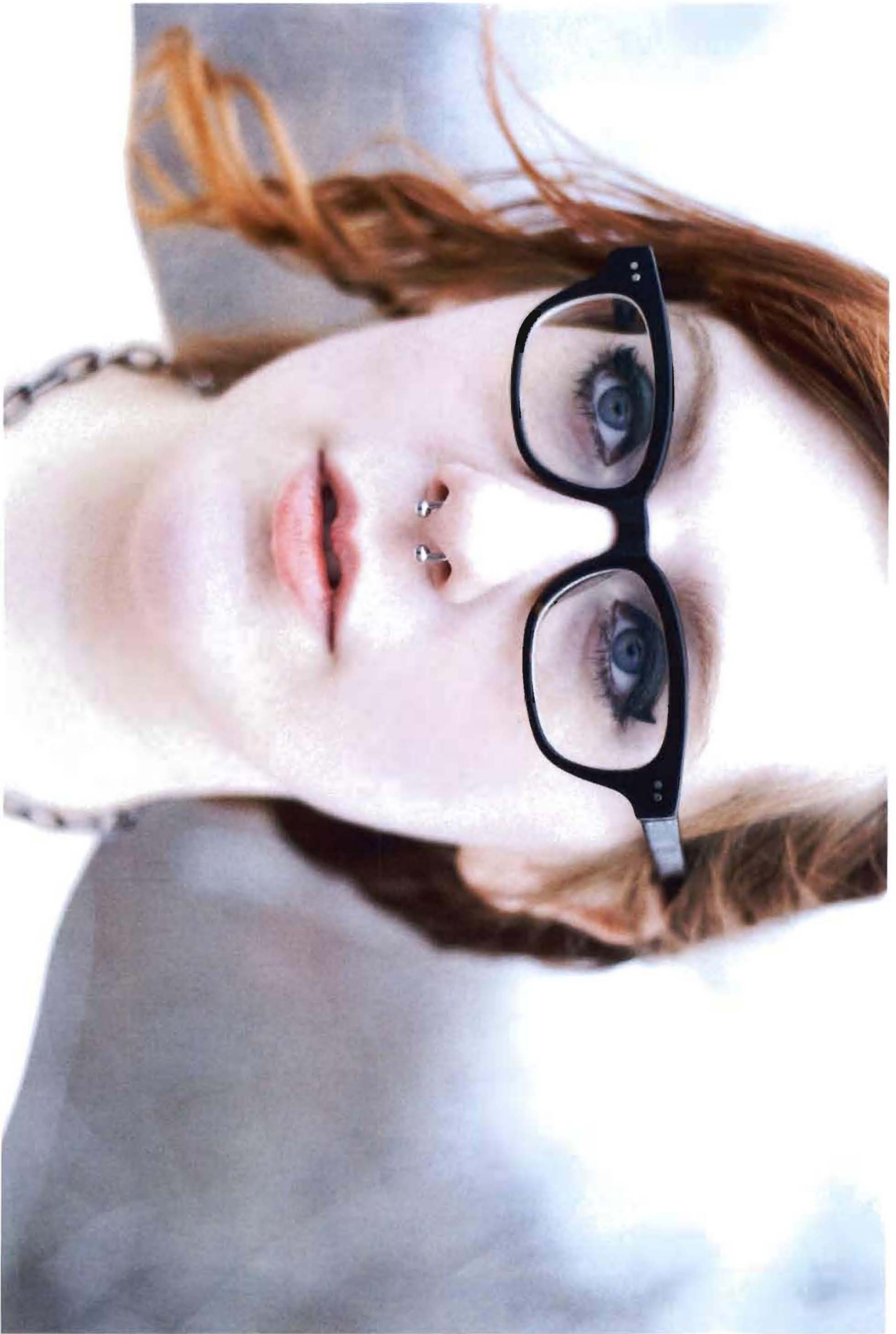


### Challenge 3





## Challenge 4



## Challenge 5, 6, and 7

